



Review: [Untitled]

Reviewed Work(s):

The Marriage of Maria Braun (Die Ehe der Maria Braun) by Rainer Werner Fassbinder;
Martin Fengler

Tom Noonan

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with a dead-end of her past and the abstract necessity to "rethink herself historically," there is real geometric growth of leaps and bounds in her character in both *The China Syndrome* and *The Electric Horseman*. In both films she ends up with the scoop she sought, but she transforms the uninterpreted facts of the story into a personal confession, a way of feeling the news. She manages in both films to observe and participate, both, and then to report, reflecting both the observations and the participation. In *The China Syndrome* she persists with her questioning, because she realizes that the cover-up for Jack Lemmon's act is to proclaim him insane in the news. She goes back on the air a final time and cries, apologizes for her lack of objectivity and "comes clean" for the cameras. She does much the same thing in *The Electric Horseman*. She falls in love with Sonny Steele, she comes up against her own guarded emotions against men, her own need to control herself and her emotions, her own city-slicker sophistication and prejudice about cowboys and the Old West. She is rewarded for her scoop. The network will send her to cover the Paris elections. Networks reward news-getters. But she carries it a step further as a kind of continued communication with the cowboy. Rising Star is roaming free in Utah, Sonny Steele is hitchhiking into anonymity and she is adding a postscript to her report, a personalized thank-you in close-up to her subject.

The whole idea seems a bit corny at first glance. Is this the new woman emerging as anchor-person and adding women's supposedly typical emotional outpouring to men's supposedly analytical and formal presentation of the news? Is this confessional style the antidote to happy news? I think both questions are real ones, but they miss the point of Fonda's presentations. It makes little sense to rejoice just with the cowboy, shedding his electric buttons and going back to the familiar wandering of the Western hero. What has more impact for me is that Hallie Martin goes back to New York with the same joy he has in Utah. She carries that joy transplanted and turns it into news. Her character poses the interesting proposition that perhaps such an investigative reporter, that bit of TV within the overall film, is the "savior," transforming the technology that endangers us into something new that works for us. Clearly, in both

The China Syndrome and *The Electric Horseman*, the media are equated with the villains. The camera comes under the same scrutiny as the nuclear industry in *The China Syndrome* and the AMPCO Corporation in *The Electric Horseman*. Both films assume a kind of post-Watergate mistrust of the media, but Fonda's collage-reporter turns the hustling and unscrupulous networks into the born-again Fifth Estate. —WILLIAM F. VAN WERT

THE MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN

(Die Ehe der Maria Braun) Director: Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Producer: Martin Fongler. Screenplay: Peter Marthesheimer and Pea Frohlich. Editor: Juliane Lorenz. Photography: Michael Ballhaus. Albatros Film; New Yorker Films.

"After seeing Douglas Sirk's films, I am more convinced than ever that love is the best, most insidious, most effective instrument of social repression," Rainer Werner Fassbinder once said. Only a romanticist like Sirk, the unduly maligned master of melodrama, could make films depicting a simple thing like love as so twisted and insidious that the "happy ending" turns into a nightmare. And only someone like Fassbinder, a man who solemnly proclaimed a film with an all-woman cast "strictly autobiographical" could make *The Marriage of Maria Braun*.

It is Germany, in the middle of World War II. A woman, Maria, is married to Hermann Braun, a soldier who is immediately shipped to the front. We next see Maria waiting anxiously at the railroad station with other war wives, all of them carrying signs on their backs that describe their lost husbands. The mood is confusion: the camera pans from a frontal shot of Maria framed by a wooden fence, revolves around an impassive soldier's face, and winds up behind Maria, still against the fence. She gives up finally, and tosses her husband's placard under the wheels of a train. (An allusion to Brecht's sympathy for those "trapped beneath the wheels"? Or a metaphor of the inevitable destructiveness of capitalism?) But Hermann returns, after the war, and finds Maria with another man. A confused Maria accidentally kills the lover. Hermann takes the blame at the trial. The next time he and Maria see each other, he is behind bars.

Fassbinder has set his stage. For the rest of the film, Maria builds her life around her love for

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Hermann, in spite of their separation. Regardless of whether or not her love is "real," it is the passion that sustains her. It is also the carrot that Fassbinder dangles before Maria as he enmeshes her in a web of complications. As the reality of a reunion with her husband is repeatedly denied, Maria's love becomes an abstraction that retreats further and further into fantasy.

After Hermann is in jail, Maria, a little tougher, more cynical, lands a job with a businessman by following a simple economic truism: maximize the return on your assets. She sweet-talks a train conductor into letting her ride in the first-class car, puts on the black, low-cut dress that got her the barmaid's job, then sits down across from the businessman, Oswald, the only other person in the car. He notices the fine shape of her legs. He also notices the way she tells off a drunken American soldier who walks in and propositions her; Maria has had experience with Americans and their language before. Oswald, who does not speak English, is stunned and seduced by this display. He offers Maria a job as a "personal advisor" and interpreter for his business, and although she bargains with her beauty, Maria proves to be a valuable addition to Oswald's company. Inspired by and armed with the security of her noble love, Maria exudes a confidence that is overwhelming. She is shrewd and instinctive, and soon becomes an efficient businesswoman who earns the begrudging respect of men. And while she does have an affair with Oswald, Maria keeps business and pleasure strictly separate. "You're not having the affair with me; I'm having one with you," she tells him.

Control is the key to Maria. She is always completely in command. But she can't have the one thing she wants more than anything else—her man. We saw the same perverse irony in *Bitter Tears*, when the cold-blooded Petra fell in love with a woman who discards her, casually, the way Petra abandoned lovers who fell for her. Petra, now knowing the pain of rejection, becomes histrionic; holding a bottle of whiskey to her breast, she rolls about on her white rug and sobs that she can't bear living without that woman. Petra's notion of love is just the need for an object, but again, it is as "real" for her as any other notion. And we saw the same poignant sadness in *Fox and His Friends*, when Fassbinder played the part of a



Hanna Schygulla in *THE MARRIAGE OF MARIA BRAUN*

working-class gay who squandered his lottery winnings in a desperate gamble for acceptance by his bourgeois lovers. Fox finances their self-indulgent whims, but receives only ridicule in return. Even death does not spare Fox from humiliation: a gay couple see Fox's corpse being rifled, recognize him as their former fall guy, then walk away, quickly, not wanting to get involved. We felt a heart-rending sympathy for Fox, as we do for Maria; she too has an ideal love that eludes her, always lying just out of reach, waiting to be realized. She is only believing in, and following, the rituals of her culture. And in the surrounding confusion, she clings even tighter. At one point in the film, we see Maria and her sister at home, alone in an upstairs bedroom. They have put on fancy gowns and make-up. The soft candlelight accentuates their beauty, but they bemoan the lack of a man to appreciate it. There is only a bureau mirror. They gaze at their images, then look down on the dresser top, on which a framed photograph and other symbols of a man lie. At another point in the film, we see the two sisters in the rubble of a bombed building, their childhood school. They are laughing, and singing songs about men and true love, but as the camera recedes, the wrecked building dwarfs them, and sounds of ongoing construction become pointedly louder; mixing with the machinegun fire that opened the film.

The forces at work against Maria are not all as impersonal as Adam Smith's "invisible hand," however. Oswald falls desperately in love with Maria, and comes up with a plan to keep her with him that his bookkeeper rightly calls "the product of a sick mind." He is advancing in years, somewhere between middle and old age, but slowly dying from dissipation (whenever we see him, there

are usually bottles of booze or wine glasses somewhere in the frame). He knows Maria is married, but that is all. Early in the film, he secretly follows her when she goes to visit Hermann in prison. Then he visits Hermann, ostensibly to "meet the man Maria loves." But he has an ulterior motive—to buy Hermann off. We do not know of this deal until the film's end: Oswald has died, and when the will is read, Hermann is the surprise benefactor of half of Oswald's factory—the implicit stipulation being that Hermann had to stay out of Germany until Oswald's death.

Poor Maria does not know of these arrangements, either. She works long and hard hours at Oswald's business to make money for Hermann's eventual release. But the sacrifice is a small one, at least in light of her sublime love for Hermann. And that is why she is puzzled when she visits him in prison; he seems cold and removed, and refuses to take any money she offers. Maria despairs as her lawyer gets nowhere with his efforts to obtain Hermann's release. Then, suddenly, Hermann is freed. When Maria arrives to pick him up, however, he is already gone; there is only a note and a rose for her. Misty-eyed, she holds the rose, her long-stemmed perfect love, to her cheek, then snaps to, giving the rose to a guard as she leaves (Fassbinder also used flowers in *Fox* to symbolize an ideal bourgeois love).

Maria's reunion with Hermann is the final betrayal to the illusory paradigm of love to which she has martyred herself. Coincidentally, he comes back the day Oswald's will is to be read, and while Maria runs around radiating love, he is cold. He barely speaks to her, and would rather listen to a soccer match on the radio than talk or make love. Maria is dazed; she looks up at Hermann from the bed and he is upside down in the frame. An unthinkable reality is confronting the one she had lived by. Unnerved, she lights a cigarette from the gas stove and then blows out the flame, instead of turning off the burner, as we have seen her do before. She answers the door in her underwear; it is the bookkeeper with Oswald's will. She puts on a white dress for the reading. The revelation of Hermann's deal with Oswald is a shock that is too much; when the bookkeeper leaves, Hermann impassively tells Maria that he is giving all the money to her, but she bitterly replies: "I gave you everything—my whole life." In a cathartic

trance, she walks into the kitchen to light another cigarette and boom—an accidental explosion kills them both.

We are as stunned as Maria by these developments. The events leading up to the reading of the will have not been very important. Fassbinder lulls us to sleep with the banalities of bourgeois life. Oswald and Maria eat in an empty restaurant. We see Oswald at home, drunk and slumped over a table. Then after Oswald's death, we see Maria eating in the same restaurant, alone, and at home, drunk, in the same pose as Oswald. Everything is quiet, and the camera barely moves. Even Hermann's return does not break the lethargy; Maria goes through the clichés of a couple on their honeymoon, and Hermann spouts those of a man long married. Matching this game is the droning sound of the soccer on the radio. But we notice, vaguely, that something is happening after all; there is a strange edge (or lack of it) to their emotions, and the camera begins to move around more. Then, in a continuing parallel to real time, all sorts of Chekhovian guns are fired in the space of a few minutes, and we're left wondering what in the world just happened. "Germany has just won the world soccer championship," the excited radio announcer answers in the explosion's aftermath.

Maria Braun is another one of Fassbinder's unrelenting schematics. There is still another protagonist burdened with, and bewildered by, a life whose day-to-day routines demand submission but make little sense. Fassbinder portrays victims. His characters may be vivacious in the beginning, but at the film's end they are enervated, passive, often dead. The transformation may be gradual, as in *Fox*, or abrupt; we watch Herr R., the proverbial ordinary worker, sit catatonically in front of a television set, then suddenly stand up, kill his companions, and hang himself (*Why Does Herr R. Run Amok?*). Sometimes the change is deliberate: the fruit peddler in *The Merchant of Four Seasons*, after being coerced and humiliated into conventionality, decides to end the disgust he feels over his success by sitting down and drinking himself to death, shot by shot. And the despair *Effi Briest* feels after having to give up the lover who sparked her drab life slowly drains her rebellious passion; death is her last way of defying an unforgiving, virtuous husband.

Maria does not choose to die. She does, how-

ever, choose to follow the rituals of duty, devotion and sacrifice that cause her repression and downfall. Why? Because her man, her key to happiness awaits her at the end of the path. It's a story line straight out of the forties, from Hollywood's "women's films." Fassbinder is knowingly trading on old clichés, and it's a risky venture that sometimes falters. But the film is held together and balanced by the amazing energy Hanna Schygulla exudes as Maria. She provides the spontaneity, the unexpected element that Fassbinder's pensiveness needs at times (by no coincidence, Schygulla is in Fassbinder's best films). Maria is a challenging role, and Schygulla successfully makes her both an all-encompassing stereotype and a distinct original. Her Maria is tough and arrogant. When she stands, her feet are spread wide apart, like a man's. When she speaks, she doesn't mince words. We always believe that she can do or have anything she wants. Yet, although certain parts of her hit home, we don't really identify with her. Fassbinder's typically cool and distant camera has a different angle; we identify with the exuberant Maria's determined will, and the fantasy of her success, but we also have the time and distance to develop our own perceptions about Maria. She is a tragic figure, and like the stoic heroines of earlier films, one that refuses to give in to self-pity. Fassbinder doesn't want us to give in to self-pity either, or to accept the tragic situation on the screen as our own fate, the way the weepies would have it. In his own sly way, Fassbinder takes the women's film and stands it on its head.

Much of *Maria Braun* is familiar melodrama: there is the theme of unrequited love; the woman who gives her all for love; the slow ebbing away of her self that results; the baby, prophetically still-born; the schemers and heart-breaking complications; and the final, tragic nobility of the heroine's emotions. But in *Maria Braun*, the sex roles and accompanying expectations are chaotic; sometimes they confirm our anticipations, other times deny them. By succeeding in business and becoming more desirable to men, Maria goes a step further than we are used to. The bookkeeper, Oswald's loyal righthand man, is an effeminate who sobs hysterically at the news of Oswald's death; Maria, the lover, barely responds. Hermann is the woman whom the man tries to impress with success, and he is also the man whose self is threatened by a

woman's achievements. And then we have Oswald, whose role is a reversal of the traditional "scheming woman." He is insidious, but also evokes our sympathy. When Maria doesn't return his love, he tries to buy it. The price Oswald pays, though, is Maria's increasing coldness, a growing cynicism that contemptuously mocks his clinging to her.

This intricate blend of characters and their emotions creates, like most melodrama, a self-contained mini-world, complete with a moral viewpoint that we are urged to accept as basically correct. But for Fassbinder, this process has an added dimension—a conflict with other beliefs and preconceptions, about what is "male" and "female," and their relative merits. The tragedy he presents is Maria's loss of "femaleness"—sympathy, intuition, empathy, nurturant qualities—and its replacement by "maleness"—a tough, cynical competitiveness that leads to self-destruction. Femaleness usually has a negative connotation but, as Mary Daly has said, only because our patriarchal system uses the term pejoratively. As a film director, Fassbinder usurps this power to name and define things. In his reworked story of a woman trying to make it in a man's world, the tragedy has nothing to do with any predestined failure, and everything to do with the woman's success.

As Adrienne Rich and other feminists have pointed out, a woman's success often depends on a series of denials, a separation of herself from other women until she is "not like them." In the film's beginning, Maria can cry with her mother and sister, and later when she talks with her sister of their troubles. But near the end, Maria is beyond tears: she ruthlessly berates her secretary (a woman), then laughs at her when she breaks into tears. It's a hollow laugh, however; Maria's separation is from herself, too, from her own inner strength—the romantic ideals and intuitive imagination that were her earlier sustenance. She loses what has derogatorily been called a woman's "weak ego boundaries," the capacity for empathy. Her ego becomes "strong," like a man's—rigid and withdrawn, steadfastly refusing any challenge to its concepts. Her response to threats becomes a further entrenchment, and produces more cynicism and rigidity. When Hermann disappears after his release, we see Maria in her office, alone, working. "I have so many things to do," she says, punching out figures on her adding machine.

Things replace emotions. We see Maria in her new house; it's a large house, but she coldly tells her mother not to get any ideas about moving in. "It's a prison for you," her mother scolds, as we see Maria framed by the bars of a picture window.

Things, objects, are very important in the closed frames of Fassbinder's films. Like Sirk, Fassbinder surrounds his characters with symbols that become representative of his characters' ideas, their outlook on life. The time period and subject material of *Maria Braun* are also reminiscent of Sirk; Maria is the "rock" that Sirk would have thrown the tempests of a changing world against. And Sirk's influence can be seen in the camera angles and lighting. But Fassbinder wants to strip the techniques of their former contexts; he is only interested in the immediate response they produce. He wants to create his own "pessimistic melodrama." *Film noir* elements are thrown in, suddenly, evoking the desired emotional response without an excess baggage of intellectual associations. Oblique, sinister shadows often surround Oswald, reflecting a restless, unstable moodiness. Sidelighting is used as effectively in the prison scenes, also: when Maria visits, the light beckons from the outside, the bars of the gate casting gloomy, triangular shadows. Then the camera shifts, showing the view from the opposite end: Hermann sits against the wall, far away, and the large bulk of a guard looms ominously, filling the foreground and absent-mindedly fingering his keys. Fassbinder's lighting is always mood-creating. The soft-focused mistiness of the scenes in the restaurant relaxes us; the luxuriant beauty is a retreat from the outside world, and we feel the mood of the diners. Similarly, the sterility of Maria's office is felt; the washed-out, filtered lightness is unnaturally bright.

And Fassbinder does not neglect sound. A doctor who certifies women as physically fit for prostitution sneaks behind a portable screen to shoot heroin after one examination, and as he does, a sudden burst of overly dramatic music startles us into sympathy. At another point, the soft, romantic playing of a piano on the sound track becomes the actual playing of Oswald as he tries to seduce Maria. The most pertinacious use of sound, however, is the recurrence of the machine-gun fire that opens the film. It creeps into other sounds, as when it blends with the clicking of Maria's adding machine, balefully becoming louder.

Ethics, not esthetics, is Fassbinder's goal in grabbing our emotions while they're off-guard. The intensity he creates is thought-provoking, not sentimental. The world outside the frame of the film is what interests Fassbinder; metaphorically, *Maria Braun* tells the story of postwar Germany: success at a price—a loss of emotions, a coldness now considered to be characteristic of Germans. The theme is familiar. Fassbinder is intensely dissatisfied with the "miracles" of modern capitalism. His characters are casualties of the economic rationalism that pervades our thinking; Fassbinder sees it as a rigged game that degrades people and drives them apart. But even if it were fair, it would not be worth playing, he says, for we spiritually prostitute ourselves in the pursuit of a private materialism. *Maria Braun* ends with the opening image of a poster of Hitler replaced by pictures of past German chancellors. They look strange because they're negatives, and when the present chancellor comes onto the screen, the image is whitened out, a trick Fassbinder used in *Effi Briest*. It's his way of waking up the audience, of jarring our intellects into asking why we have vague, curious feelings about what we just saw.

Art, when it is good, is a process of personal transformation; the artist puts down more than he or she consciously, or rationally, knows. And this is the power of Fassbinder's films; they speak to the subconscious. The disturbing criticism present in *Maria Braun* has an effect on us because it is implanted at a deep level. By playing with genre preconceptions, Fassbinder establishes a broadly based connection with the audience. We don't really need to know where his material came from or what he is alluding to for his conversation to work, either; the morals of the old melodramas are reflected in our culture. Much of the beauty of *Maria Braun* is Fassbinder's ability to use past film conventions without becoming bound or limited by them; he can still articulate personal concerns. Fassbinder himself has "weak ego boundaries." He rejects capitalism as incapacitating, and searches for a way to overcome the numbing incompleteness he sees. Through his art, he struggles toward wholeness. But the standards are still those of a society "not like him." Thus the situation of a woman trying to make it in a man's world is much like his own.

With *Maria Braun*, Fassbinder confronts us,

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but in a subtle, relaxed way. His camera seems more comfortable with the idea of allowing our senses to be involved, entertained. That concession can only help Fassbinder thematically. In some of his past films an overbearing grimness would occasionally become too conscious a reminder that yes, we are alienated. Our lack of community confronts us daily. And while an escape into the fantasy of a perfect form in art would be the worst thing that could happen, we do need the respite that art can provide, the brief intimacy of an imaginative transformation of reality. Artists like Fassbinder continually challenge the way we look at things. He takes powerful and encompassing chunks of everyday life and carries on a dialogue that slowly grows, then dawns on you with a gasp, a quick catch of the breath. That Fassbinder works his art with "popular" forms can only be a further attestation to his acute perceptiveness and sensitivity.

—TOM NOONAN

NOSFERATU

Director: Werner Herzog. Script: Herzog. Photography: Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein. Twentieth Century-Fox.

Herzog considers *Nosferatu* Murnau's best film and Murnau Germany's greatest director; he has also been at pains, in recent interviews, to make it clear that his new film is not simply a remake. It is true that his *Nosferatu* follows the basic plot and includes some of the same dialogue and imagery found in Murnau's version, but a close viewing shows that no more than three shots are exactly the same in both films (allowing for the fact that Herzog's are in color). What he does perhaps twenty times is to duplicate Murnau's *mise en scène* but place the camera differently. For example, Murnau's fast-motion overhead shot of Dracula's loading his coffins on a cart and leaving the castle is here presented at normal speed and with the camera displaced approximately 90°. What Herzog does is to draw on Stoker's novel, Browning's and Murnau's films, the folk backgrounds of the vampire mythos, and even some recent articles on horror theory (he appears familiar, for instance, with Dillard's essay on the fear of the failure of death, "Even a Man Who is Pure at Heart: Poetry and Danger in the Horror Film," since he has Dracula virtually quote from it), to all of which he makes



NOSFERATU: Isabelle Adjani and Klaus Kinski

an original contribution. We know we are watching a Herzog film throughout, especially in the scenes of the frustrated bureaucrats who are unable to arrest Van Helsing properly because all the police and jail wardens are dead from the plague; of the citizens dining in the public square with a sea of white rats at their feet (followed by a cut to the same scene with rats covering the table and the people unaccountably vanished); of the gypsy boy sawing at a violin while Harker lies at his feet, dazed from a fall during his escape from Dracula's castle; of Lucy rejecting Van Helsing's impotent scientism and insisting not just on her faith but on her "inner vision"; and in the treatment of the phantom castle, seen in ruins from the outside but complete from the inside.

We recognize the Herzog of *Heart of Glass* (both films were photographed by Jörg Schmidt-Reitwein) in the time-lapse shots of clouds and mist, where the sky runs like water and—in the closing shot—the beach sands move like wind to screen right while thin dark clouds rush to screen left; in the music of Popul Vuh, which alternates in eerie celebration with Gounod's *Sanctus*, a medieval choir, the sounds of heartbeats and footsteps and clocks, and a most effective use of the opening moments of Wagner's *Das Rheingold*; and in the gypsy's description of Borgo Pass, where "the light divides." There is also an interesting parallel with *Aguirre* (both Aguirre and Dracula were played by Klaus Kinski) in that both films show how the obsessive pursuit of power, the destructive apotheosis of conquest, can strand the hero in a dream. Aguirre and Dracula engage what little pathos they deserve by the same means: each concentrates his love on a woman he destroys, and each is hopelessly isolated in his vision of himself as superhuman.